

Seven Poems

Caledonia Kearns

Craftwork

Although black hisses through
the darkness trying to speak,
it's Friday in New York and
there's Radiance at the bar.
She's so bright the bartender
forgets her order, the regulars
their usual hellos. All I want
is to smell the peonies outside,
a reminder of his delicious body
still lost to that old season,
the one with compact blossoms
when Radiance distributes
her wisdom to the honeybees
about which flowers to prioritize
but it's disquieting how I must resist
the desire to resurrect his form
so I leave the bar. Radiance comes
along and we play kick the can.
I ask for help with the urge to wrestle
with what makes my mouth water.
Girl, Radiance whispers, and I almost
need sunglasses to read her lips,
Don't stir it up, trouble or the man.
Let them find you. Withhold.

Ruby is Released

I don't want to peel the pomegranate, expose its rind.
I don't want to choose crimson though I'd move
through its honeycomb chambers to seek the divine
in those garnet seeds, like a drone working overtime to prove

allegiance to his queen. I know danger lies inside the fruit,
wait for an answer to appear on white paper in Arial font,
folded and secured in a square envelope. It's rooted
in the obvious, reveals only what it wants,

tells me how yellow and white flesh separates the seeds
in clusters, tells me how ruby nectar settles between core and sheath.
I didn't see what had been contained when you said I could cheat,
blind as I was to the season: exit, desire, art pushing up from beneath.

I don't want to remember your turning just as everything was breaking
open, the juice I sucked from my fingers, a red witness to your waking.

Saturday

She wakes up next to me. Leaves for TV.
I promised I'd make pancakes, will myself
to the kitchen. She's on the couch. Coffee. Batter.
I ask if she wants to help me flip.
She tells me, *Papi puts in vanilla first.*
I taught Papi about vanilla, I don't say
but he was always better at breakfast.
I fetch the cinnamon. She puts in half a teaspoon.
We spend the day in pajamas. She and the dolls play.
I clean her room. Sorting schoolwork into folders
I see squiggles give way to angles over time.

Later, I call her in for macaroni.
Ella sings *I Get a Kick Out of You.*
I pick her up, put our hands together,
we spin to *Mere alcohol doesn't thrill me at all.*
Cold rattles the windows. Last night's story
featured words beginning with Q. Quickly
and quietly we quirkily ate quince under the quilt.
I will never have quints, quitting content with one,
no qualms (not quite), still I remain faithful
to the quasar whose light enters her room, a firefly
in hot summer, finding its way, questioning the dark.

Don't Dress Your Snake Up in a Muu-Muu

Lust smells like marzipan fish.
Desire like brine, a salty wish

for skin on skin. In Mexico, Selena
leaned into me as the waiter cleared

her plate, noted his smooth dark
hands were like her *abuelo's*, then ran

around the playground after a stray dog.
That spring I explained the divorce,

Papi didn't want to be married anymore.
She said, *Yeah, people just need to do*

what they need to do. I said, *You never
want to force anyone to be with you.*

*It's like in Free to Be You and Me,
"Don't Dress Your Snake Up in a Muu-Muu,"*

she replied. And I thought of her father
and her mother, reptiles.

How we swallowed up fingers and toes,
shed our skin underneath long floral dresses,

never showing each other how we'd moved
beyond limb and freckle, hissing barely

above a whisper as we, cold-blooded,
slithered apart.

I Keep Forgetting to Tell You

(The New York Times photo is captioned CALM BEFORE THE STORM)

On my refrigerator there's a photo of a sunset
over Baghdad just after the invasion.
The sky's orange and purple with rows of clouds
and the clouds and the purple make the sky look like ocean.
The Tigris is on the left. Its water's a mirrored silver.
Few of the buildings in the foreground are lit
though their concrete's intact, having not yet begun to bleed plaster.

Reader, I keep forgetting to tell you what happened. In 2003.
There was death all around me—my grandfather, two great aunts, the dog.
There was cancer—my husband's ex-wife, his father.
My mother came to the city before he left me.
We marched, she shouted.
One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war.

And I was embarrassed by her vehemence,
though there's nothing profane about saying fuck
when you're being fucked over.

I keep forgetting to tell you about the war.
Not the before, when I spit bile in the sink most mornings
as I listened to Hans Blix
talk about the weapons of mass destruction
he couldn't find.

In eighth grade studying the Tigris and Euphrates,
I saw the Fertile Crescent as a piece of lunar landscape that could bear a child.
I want to go back to papyrus, touch the beginnings
of transcription the way I used my fingertips
to brush softly over my husband's skin, read what he couldn't say,
that he wanted both, to leave and to stay.

I keep forgetting to tell you about the last five years.
What the river's witnessed. American soldiers flying over oceans—4,000 of them dead;
millions of Iraqis displaced and gone.
But it's the mother who fucks so she can feed her kids
I think about when I'm alone.
That mother. She asks the soldiers she services to use Roman script,
write their names in a small notebook, then records in the back
in Arabic, what dusk looks like each night as she walks home.

At the Frick the Day Benazir Bhutto Died

I'm sending Vermeer an e-mail.
The computer screen's backlit,
shoots a small shaft of light
into the room. I want him to tell me
what it is about the duet he likes
so much. There are always two.
The maid and the mistress.
The officer and the laughing girl.
I want him to tell me what the letters say.

Or was it all about cartography—
the maps behind the still person,
their faint lines moving into foreign territories.
I wonder if the light moved or transformed
when her body went down.
If it was like the La Tour where Mary
receives God's grace for the first time,
and it's the candle that speaks,
not the angels, after the match is struck.

What It Is to Want

My contradictions set me tasks, errands.

Muriel Rukeyser

I say yes, always, to the purple
shirt as it walks through the door.

I say yes, always, to crimson in the glass,
a hand outstretched,

yes to her hair as I smooth it
from her sleeping face.

My thighs speak of butter for the bread,
avocado on the tongue.

You will find salt in the cupboard,
one lemon, dark chocolate in the fridge.

Fictions are what we make up
when we fail to ask questions,

trying to define desire while speaking
in gerunds, taunting and flaunting

their connections, the inevitable
fusion of noun and verb.

I say yes, always, to the fruit,
its rind and pith, how seeds

are extracted with juice, the seep
and squeeze of citrus, the bittersweet.